

MALDIVES

The constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government enforced these restrictions. The 2008 constitution designates Islam as the official state religion. The law prohibits the practice by citizens of any religion other than Islam. Non-Muslim foreigners are allowed to practice their religious beliefs only in private. Visitors must also refrain from encouraging local citizens to practice any religion other than Islam.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Freedom of religion remained severely restricted. The government required that all citizens be Muslims, and government regulations were based on Sharia (Islamic law).

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 500 square miles, distributed across an estimated 1,200 coral atolls and islands, and a population of 395,000 plus 80,000 to 100,000 foreign workers.

The entirety of the population belongs to a distinct ethnic group with historical roots in South Indian, Sinhalese, and Arab communities. The vast majority of the Muslim population practices Sunni Islam. Non-Muslim foreigners, including an estimated 675,000 tourists who visit annually (predominantly Chinese, Europeans and Japanese) and 100,000 foreign workers (mainly Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Indians, and Pakistanis), in general were allowed to practice their religious beliefs only in private. Most Muslim tourists and Muslim foreign workers chose to practice Islam in private or at mosques located at the resorts where they worked and lived.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these restrictions. The constitution designates Islam as the official state religion, and the government and many citizens at all levels interpreted this provision to impose a requirement that all citizens be Muslims and that non-Muslims could not vote. The constitution also stipulates that the president must be Sunni. The language of the constitution relating to the fundamental rights and duties of citizens does not provide for the right to freedom of religion or belief. Furthermore, the constitution precludes non-Muslims from voting and holding public positions. The constitution does not prohibit discrimination based on religious preference. It excludes religion from a list of attributes for which people should not be discriminated against.

Several articles in the constitution make the practice of Islam mandatory. Article 36 states that it is imperative for parents and the state to provide children with primary and secondary education. Section (c) of that article states education shall strive to inculcate obedience to Islam and instill love for Islam. According to Forum 18, a foreign nonprofit group that promotes religious freedom, in practice this wording is understood to mean that parents must educate their children as Muslims, whether they are Muslim or not.

The Protection of the Religious Unity Among Maldivians Act states both the government and the people must protect religious unity. Any statement or action contrary to this law was subject to criminal penalty; if a person was found guilty, sentences ranged from a fine to imprisonment.

In 2008 the Minister for Islamic affairs stated that there was no reason to allow other religions in the country, since it was a very unique country where all citizens were Muslims.

Non-Muslim foreign residents were allowed to practice their religious beliefs only if they did so privately and did not encourage local citizens to participate.

The government followed civil law based on Sharia. Civil law was subordinate to Sharia; in the event a situation was not covered by civil law, as well as in certain cases such as divorce and adultery, Sharia was applied.

According to press reports, in 2007 the Ministry of Justice banned clothing that conceals a person's identity in court; however, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, which was later replaced by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, did not ratify former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's call for a blanket ban on the full veil. There have been no further developments since President Nasheed took office.

Foreigners were not allowed to import any items deemed "contrary to Islam," including alcohol, pork products, or religious statues for worship. Alcoholic beverages were available to tourists on resort islands, but it remained against the law to offer alcohol to a local citizen.

The government observed Islamic holy days as national holidays.

Mosques were required to register with the government. The government maintained and funded most mosques.

In 2008 the Ministry of Islamic Affairs replaced the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. The ministry mandated Islamic instructions in schools, funded salaries of religious instructors, and certified imams, who were responsible for presenting government-approved sermons. By law no one may publicly discuss Islam unless invited to do so by the government, and imams could not prepare sermons without government authorization; but some in the country complained that newly found freedom of expression had led to foreign speakers giving lectures promoting more conservative styles of Islam than that espoused by the government ministry.

The Human Rights Commission reported that there were female imams who, in that role, interacted with women only.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs of the government closed 210 mosques set aside for the exclusive use of women in 2009. Following the closure, government officials cited fiscal austerity and lack of use. But contacts at women's nongovernmental organization (NGO) noted this would restrict the community space for women's religious activities.

Islamic instruction was a mandatory part of the school curriculum, and the government funded the salaries of instructors of Islam. Islamic instruction was only one component of the curriculum used in the majority of schools. Arabic-medium schools focused primarily on Islam. Those who sought further religious

education obtained it in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or other Muslim majority countries. Schools offered religious education for women.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government prohibited non-Muslim religious identity. In 2008 President Nasheed told *The Sunday Times*, "We have to respect different religious views. I hope with improved governance and the rights of people being guaranteed, the issue of fundamentalism will subside. People who want to preach can preach, and those who want to follow a different line also do so. Fundamentalism will be eradicated with democracy." However, the president did not dismantle former president Gayoom's restrictions on religious freedom.

President Nasheed replaced the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs with a new Ministry for Islamic Affairs. He appointed the head of the religiously conservative Adaalath Party, Sheikh Abdul Majeed Abdul Bari, as the head of the new ministry. Minister Bari told Minivan News in 2008 that he believed apostasy was one of three offenses that must be punished by death, along with adultery and murder.

The government continued to control all religious matters. Like its predecessor the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs provided guidance on religious matters. The government set standards for imams to ensure they had adequate theological qualifications and to prevent fundamentalism from gaining ground. Minivan News reported that every Friday prayer since President Nasheed's inauguration had been led by a religious figure from the Adhaalath Party. It stated that in this way, Islam was being controlled by one group at the expense of other prominent scholars. The same report observed that a new ministry newspaper published every Friday, called Road to Steadfastness, printed only articles written by Adaalath Party members. According to government officials, the purpose was to maintain a moderate Islamic environment rather than an extremist one.

There were no places of worship for adherents of other religious groups. Speaking to Minivan News in October 2009, Sheikh Shaheem Ali Saeed, state minister of Islamic affairs, stated places of worship for other religions could not be built in the country. "We will not accept it under any circumstances. It cannot be done. All Maldivians are Muslims." Shaheem noted that foreigners such as teachers and laborers were free to worship in the privacy of their homes, but congregating for prayer was illegal.

The government prohibited the importation of icons and religious statues, but it generally permitted the importation of religious literature, such as Bibles, for personal use. The sale of religious items, such as Christmas cards, was restricted to the resort islands patronized by foreign tourists.

Under Majeed Abdul Bari, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs took several steps to increase its control over the ways Islam is practiced in the country. For example, in April 2009 the ministry started a program to promote religious awareness in schools; however, the program promoted only Islam rather than an awareness of other religions. Miadhu News reported the program aimed to create a disciplined youth who "love the religion and the country" and respected their parents.

In February 2009 President Nasheed inaugurated an independent council of religious scholars called a "fiqh (jurisprudence) academy." The council consisted of 17 religious scholars, all of whom were appointed by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The council's stated purpose was to debate religious matters, issue fatwas, and link with fiqh academies in other countries. The vice-president of the academy stated one of the aims was to tackle religious divisions in the country. During the year, the Fiqh Academy released two regulations, one on how to use the translation of the Qur'an published by the president's office and the other banning public places of worship for people of faiths other than Islam. The council held regular meetings.

During the reporting period, the ministry banned religious groups from holding separate Friday prayers. A member of one prayer group stated the fixed prayer time of 12:35 p.m. was not Islamic. Instead, the group prayed at the time of the first call to prayer, which depended on the lunar calendar. The ministry justified the ban, stating that separate prayer groups violated the Protection of Religious Unity Act that was intended to promote religious homogeneity.

The Telecommunication Authority of Maldives stated that since 2008 it blocked 11 Web sites containing anti-Islamic sentiments and pornography at the instruction of the Ministry for Islamic Affairs. Three of the Web sites – www.rajjeislam.com and two blogs – were unblocked in April 2009 after their publishers and authors agreed to remove objectionable content. The blocked Web sites included a blog called Random Reflections and a Dhivehi and English-language Christian Web site.

According to Minister of Islamic Affairs Abdul Bari, the election of President Nasheed's government provided a mandate to stop "un-Islamic" conduct. Steps were reportedly underway to close "discos" in Male to prevent members of the

opposite sex from mingling. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs stated that it believed the prevalence of "un-Islamic" practices within the country was due to a lack of religious awareness. During the reporting period, the ministry conducted awareness programs in Male and on various atolls to ensure that citizens were given the "correct information on Islam." The ministry also provided assistance and counseling to foreigners seeking to convert to Islam.

Parents must raise their children to be Muslim in accordance with the law. Foreigners can raise their children to follow any religious teachings as long as they practiced privately in their homes or hotel rooms and did not try to include local citizens in their worship.

The government prohibited non-Muslim clergy and missionaries from proselytizing or conducting public worship services.

Islamic proselytizing was illegal unless a government representative was present.

Conversion by a Muslim to another religious group was interpreted as a violation of Sharia and may result in punishment, including the loss of the convert's citizenship. There were no known cases of the government discovering converts and rescinding citizenship as a result of conversion. During previous reporting periods, would-be converts were detained and counseled to dissuade them from converting; however, according to press reports, a handful of persons in the country's blogging community reportedly identified themselves as atheist or Christian.

Forum 18 reported that many persons, especially secular individuals and non-Muslims, voiced their concern over the restrictions on religion in anonymous weblogs. The organization stated fear of social ostracism and government punishment prevented this concern from being openly expressed.

Faith-based NGOs were not specifically precluded by law from operating.

The law prohibits public statements that are contrary to Islam.

The government registered only clubs and other private associations that did not contravene Islamic or civil law.

The 2008 constitution states the president and cabinet ministers must be Sunni Muslims. Furthermore, in contrast to its predecessor, the 2008 constitution also

states members of the People's Majlis (parliament) and the judiciary must be Sunni Muslims. Atoll chiefs must be Muslim; however, they were not required to be Sunni. The same was also true of members of the Special People's Majlis, which drew up the 2008 constitution.

Family law permits men and women to marry non-Muslim foreigners but the foreigners must convert to Islam before marriage.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Freedom

There were limited reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There has not been a pattern of discrimination, intolerance, or harassment.

On July 11, 2010, Ismail Mohamed Didi, an air traffic controller, committed suicide. An e-mail written by Ismail, released shortly after his death, revealed that he had been seeking asylum abroad for fear of persecution over his lack of religious belief. Ismail had admitted he was an atheist to his work colleagues and at the time of his death, he was the subject of an internal investigation for professed apostasy. He subsequently had been harassed at work and received anonymous phone calls threatening violence if he did not repent.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government does not maintain an embassy in the country. The U.S. ambassador in Sri Lanka also was accredited to the government, and officers from the embassy in Colombo traveled frequently to the country. The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.